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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the assessment of proficiency in a foreign language for credit in higher education. This refers to the process of awarding academic credit for tested proficiency in a foreign language rather than for the number of years a student has spent studying a particular language. The Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provides the frame of reference for this digest. The following questions are addressed: (1) What are the considerations involved in developing language proficiency requirements as credit standards?; (2) How are the ACTFL proficiency guidelines applied to the determinination of proficiency requirements; and (3) Are there examples of proficiency-based programs currently in effect? A case study of the experience of the University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts, with implementing a proficiency-based language requirement is provided. (VWL)

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Assessing Language Proficiency for Credit in Higher Education

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This *Digest* assumes general familiarity with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) skill level descriptions. For more information on the ACTFL guidelines, see the resources listed in the reference section at the end of the *Digest*.

There are two broad solutions to the assessment of foreign language proficiency for credit in higher education. The first solution is to use time as an indicator (a seat-time requirement). For example, students must bring two to three years of secondary-level foreign language study to fulfill a university entrance requirement, and must complete an additional two to three quarters of study at the higher education level to meet the graduation requirement. The second solution is to require tested competence in a foreign language (a proficiency requirement). Students may be required to pass a proficiency examination before being admitted to an institution of higher learning or may be required to pass a proficiency examination as part of a graduation requirement. This *Digest* focuses on the second type of assessment. The objective of a requirement based on proficiency testing is to encourage students to develop not only basic survival skills in the language being studied, but to achieve the ability to communicate in a number of contexts (Freed, 1987).

Foreign language proficiency is defined here as the ability to use the language modalities (listening, reading, writing, speaking), and to assume the cultural framework of the language being studied for the purpose of communicating ideas and information. While guidelines for a specific definition of foreign language proficiency do not yet exist, the closest description available is in the Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1982).

What Are the Considerations Involved in Developing Language Proficiency Requirements as Credit Standards?

Articulation. Articulation between secondary schools and institutions of higher education is very important. If proficiency guidelines are to be implemented at the university level, great care must be taken to communicate expectations to secondary programs. The choice of proficiency levels for entrance or graduation (or both) requires consultation and communication with colleagues in secondary schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges.

Utility. Ascertaining how usable and accurate a student's language skills are is a major concern for students who aim beyond the requirement and seek to use their language skills in their studies or professionally, and for curriculum designers, textbook writers, and supervisors in the work place.

Testing. The availability or development of appropriate and reliable tests is a major concern. Should an institution use tests that are already available or create their own? What are the costs involved in developing a test? Who among the staff has the necessary qualifications for developing or administering a language proficiency test? The less commonly taught languages, particularly those for which there are no ACTFL proficiency guidelines (e.g., Arabic, Latin, Urdu, Norwegian, Hindi) require other considerations (Stansfield, & Kenyon, 1990). For example, in Arabic, there are five different macro-dialects. For which dialect should proficiency guidelines be created?

How Are the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines Applied to the Determination of Proficiency Requirements?

The ACTFL proficiency guidelines act as a construct for examining and determining the language abilities of foreign language students, and set a standard for assessing three factors that constitute proficiency for each modality: Function, Content/Context, and Accuracy. A performance profile of a student is presented in terms of the functions (tasks) that the student can perform in the language being studied, the types of content/context in which these tasks can be performed, and how accurately these tasks can be performed (Byrnes, et al., 1986).

Are There Examples of Proficiency-Based Programs Currently in Effect?

The University of Pennsylvania (Freed 1983, 1987) has implemented a proficiency requirement based on five standards: oral interaction, listening and reading comprehension, writing, and cultural knowledge. Performance tests relating to an average of Intermediate High on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are used to measure the four language modalities. (An evaluation of cultural competence has not yet been created.) The College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) achievement tests are included as part of the testing program. Students must achieve a score of 500 on the CEEB tests. Essentially, the system is a compensatory one. An average Intermediate High can be achieved by higher ratings in some modalities than in others. The compensatory system also includes the CEEB tests. The implementation of the program has produced positive effects on faculty decisions relating to language programs, given a new sense of importance to foreign language teaching assistants, and made visible changes in course content toward language use.

The University of Arizona has outlined a plan (Schulz, 1988) for the implementation of a proficiency requirement. This plan is based on the analysis of a set of tasks that define and test proficiency at the fourth semester level. The plan contains the following steps: 1) review the literature on proficiency and proficiency testing; 2) define the foreign language requirement in terms of language competence; 3) select possible testing procedures and item types; 4) determine implications for instruction and the training of teaching assistants; 5) create

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computerized item banks for all language modalities and knowledge areas; 6) pretest items for all levels of instruction; 7) conduct an item analysis for all items in the computerized item banks; 8) as a quality check, redo pretesting with test items that have been chosen; 9) determine minimum competence levels or decide on the overall score necessary to fulfill the language requirement; 10) establish policies for students who do not meet the requirement; 11) implement the requirement with continued evaluation of the testing program; 12) develop a guide so that secondary schools, community colleges, and other colleges and universities may understand the requirement; 13) implement placement testing for students with prior language study.

The University of Minnesota: A Case Study

The Requirement. Currently, the foreign language requirement at the University of Minnesota, College of Liberal Arts, is based on the demonstration of a proficiency standard for entrance to the college as well as demonstration of proficiency for graduation.

Testing. A set of tests in listening, reading, writing, and speaking for both entrance and graduation have been created to measure students' competence at these two points. The tests are based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. For the entrance standard, the levels chosen are Intermediate-Low for listening and reading, and Novice-High for speaking and writing. For the graduation requirement, the levels are Intermediate-High for listening and reading, and Intermediate-Mid for speaking and writing. All speaking tests take the shape of the oral interview with test items in each of the Warm-Up, Level Check, Probe, and Wind-Down phases. The listening and reading tests are machine scorable, multiple-choice tests, of 40 items each. The entrance speaking test is a recorded oral interview, while the graduation requirement speaking test is a face-to-face oral interview. The writing tests for both entrance and graduation require students to produce written language at a specific level. The tests are constructed so that 80% of the items are either below or at the chosen proficiency levels; 20% of the items probe into the next level. The structures assess student ability to sustain the levels of ability indicated. For a complete description of the levels chosen and a more complete description of the requirement, see Arendt, Lange, and Wakefield (1986), and Foreign Language Proficiency Standards (1986).

Program and Test Development. The testing program was developed from three workshops: curriculum, test types and constraints, and item writing. In the workshops, participants came from secondary schools, community colleges, private colleges, the state university system, and the University of Minnesota. A three-day curriculum workshop reacquainted the participants of a 1983 summer proficiency workshop with the ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines. A subsequent workshop on test constraints and test types for each of the language modalities determined the compromises necessary to make tests cost effective, efficient, and appropriate. The results provided a framework for the testing program: two tests would be machine scored (listening and reading); the entrance speaking test would be recorded, whereas the test for graduation would be live. The third workshop developed, over a five day (40 hours) period, item banks for listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

From the summer of 1984 through the spring of 1986, tests were created, and test items were examined through pilot testing in both the University of Minnesota courses and in some public school classes. A revised set of tests was ready for the initial phase-in of the project in the fall 1986. Those tests have been revised twice since that time; alternate forms of the writing test have been created; and some further adjustments have been made to items to make them more appropriate. The entrance speaking test has just been finished and will be used for the first time at the beginning of the fall quarter, 1990. Up to this point, the testing program has generated, revised, pilot tested, and put into use some 36 tests. The next effort will be the expansion of the program into the less commonly studied languages.

Results. In Minnesota, language enrollments in secondary schools have risen dramatically over the past six years. This effect does not result from the University of Minnesota requirement alone; it is coupled with a state requirement that all secondary schools offer at least three years of one language. Language enrollments have increased from a low of 17% in the early 1980's to a high of 35% in 1989. Currently, 70-80% of admitted freshmen are passing the entrance tests in listening, reading, and writing. For those students who go on to the graduation requirement, 60-70% are passing tests in listening, reading, and writing. Probably the most important result is that students are completing the language requirement at the end of their freshman year.

Conclusion

After considerable planning and communication across education levels, all of the above mentioned programs have, thus far, indicated positive results in the implementation of a foreign language requirement based on tested competence. Perhaps, the next question to be addressed is how students can use this newly developed language competence. One answer is found in the use of foreign language courses in the liberal arts curriculum. From philosophy to economics, second language study complements and enriches education by offering a different key to knowledge and discovery (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). In this way, language competence is usable across the curriculum.

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For Further Reading

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